Exploring Gender Prototypes of Young Adults: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

People's perceptions of gender are evolving as they are influenced by multiple factors. The present study aims to answer the research question: "What are the masculine, feminine, and non-binary prototypes of young adults?" The goal of the study is also to compare the two masculine prototypes and the two feminine prototypes and evaluate whether socially undesirable features are more common for any of the prototypes. To investigate this, in a qualitative replication study, a convenience sample of young adults ($N = 98$) was asked to indicate their ideas regarding at least one of the following people: *a masculine male*, *a masculine female*, *a feminine male*, *a feminine female*, or *a non-binary person*. Their answers were coded and organized into themes and features. The analysis revealed that most features fit into three themes: *personality*, *appearance*, and *interests*. Masculinity was described by features such as being muscular, self-confident, or wearing casual clothes. Femininity was viewed through features such as wearing make-up, being well-dressed, being concerned with one's appearance, or interpersonally oriented traits such as being caring, kind, or social. Descriptions of a non-binary person focused on nonconformity to gender norms or struggling with gender identity. The results also showed that socially undesirable features were not mentioned frequently in any of the gender prototypes. The findings highlight the positive and slightly less traditional perspective that young adults hold on gender today. Future research could investigate gender perceptions in Eastern cultures and help develop interventions to tackle harmful pressuring prototypes.

Keywords: gender, prototype, masculine, feminine, non-binary, qualitative research, young adults

Exploring Gender Prototypes of Young Adults: A Qualitative Study

As early as 1949, Simone de Beauvoir challenged the view of gender as a static entity, famously asserting that "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole" (de Beauvoir, 1949, p.330). Since then, multiple scholars have taken different stands on the concept of gender, adopted various measures, and tried to explain gender differences (Hoffman, 2001). In line with de Beauvoir's views, gender has increasingly been understood as a construct that reflects society and is culturally dependent (Visser, 2002). More recently, the idea of gender has shifted toward a more multidimensional and evolving construct, acknowledging gender fluidity and the rise of identities outside the male-female binary (Johnson et al., 2009; Richards et al., 2016).

Understanding how people view the concepts of gender is vital, as it has important implications in everyday life. For instance, women who differ from the traditional feminine prototype are more likely to encounter more negative interpersonal and legal consequences in the case of sexual harassment compared to women who fit in the feminine prototype category (Kaiser et al., 2022). These include examples such as blaming the victims and seeing them as more noncredible or less help offered by bystanders. Additionally, studying the concept of gender is prevalent in organizational psychology, such as in topics of leadership, as the male and female prototypes for a leader vary and it has substantial consequences (Giacomin et al., 2021). A further example is the research by Swami and colleagues (2008), which examined the gender-specific expectations and perceptions of people, such as striving for success or denial of weakness in connection to suicides, concluding that it might be beneficial to target gender-specific norms, cognitions, attitudes, or behaviors in suicide prevention. In general, how people

view the concepts of gender matters, as it influences behavior, expectations, or attitudes in various spheres of life.

Even though the terms gender and sex are sometimes used interchangeably in everyday language, it is important to properly differentiate them, as they are distinct concepts. The term *sex* has commonly been understood as referring to one's physical and biological characteristics, while the term *gender* has been described as more dynamic and associated with psychological features and behavior (Etaugh, 2016). The concept of gender was introduced in a paper by sexologist Money and colleagues (1955) in the context of gender roles. This also marks the beginning of the term gender becoming much more common in research articles (than the word sex), which grew even more with the feminist waves (Haig, 2004). Building on the understanding that gender is a socially constructed, culture-dependent, and dynamic construct (Johnson et al., 2009), this paper will focus on gender rather than sex.

Gender has been understood and measured in terms of masculinity and femininity, however, what these terms mean has been developing. In earlier conceptualizations, masculinity and femininity have been described as terms of opposite concepts, each representing a set of characteristics distinct to men and women (Hoffman, 2001). However, this traditional bipolar conception of gender has been challenged, and an idea of a dualistic view, in which people can possess both types of characteristics or even their mix, has been proposed (Spence & Helmreich, 1978, p. 109). This idea has been supported in research, for example, in the study by Visser (2002), in which participants showed no inclination toward binary opposites of masculinity and femininity.

In line with the development of what gender is, the concept of androgyny emerged. *Androgyny* is defined as possessing both masculine and feminine characteristics (Bem, 1974). As

it was introduced and implemented into measurement, the main advantage was that it allowed for flexibility rather than rigid borders of masculine and feminine (Martin et al., 2017). The Bem Sex-Role Inventory included this concept in its measurement (Bem, 1974). Similarly, the Personal Attributes Questionnaire (PAQ) also adopted this perspective by measuring the instrumental and expressive attributes associated with masculinity and femininity, respectively, including a male-female subscale to assess androgyny (Spence et al., 1975). This marks the start of moving beyond the strict gender bipolarity and allowing for the idea that there are also similarities between men and women.

More recently, apart from masculinity, femininity, and androgyny, gender has been increasingly understood as a spectrum or even a multidimensional continuum (Castleberry, 2019). Within this broader understanding, the term *non-binary* serves as a broad label for individuals whose gender identity does not fit within the traditional male or female classifications (Matsuno et al., 2021). A recent study in the US suggests the prevalence of non-binary people to be around 11% of American LGBTQ+ adults (Wilson & Meyer, 2021). In a less recent study surveying the Dutch population, 5.7% of people assigned male at birth and 4% of people assigned female at birth indicated experiencing gender incongruence or ambivalence (Kuyper & Wijsen, 2014). These data highlight the need for more inclusive approaches both in the measurement and understanding of gender in research, moving beyond the binary frameworks.

One way of gender measurement that has shed more light on the meaning of the concepts of gender is the use of prototypes (Helgeson, 1994). To define the term, Rosch (1975) describes a *prototype* as an exemplar or a group of characteristics illustrative of a category in one's judgment, such as a rose that could be categorized as a prototype of the category flower amongst

many people (Visser, 2002). A qualitative study of prototypes relies entirely on the participants'
generations of attributes and does not give any in the questions, which allows for a more flexible
exploration of gender, giving the participants the chance to generate their own gender
associations.

Both masculinity and femininity have been described in terms of personality traits,
physical appearance, interests, or typical behaviors (Kachel et al., 2016). In general, the
measures of femininity often focused on interpersonally oriented, expressive features such as
being tactful, gentle, affectionate, kind, or aware of the emotions of other people (Bem, 1974;
Spence & Helmreich, 1980). In more recent research, some of the features participants associated
with femininity go in line with the earlier mentioned, such as being emotional, caring, or social,
while other prototypes included attributes connected to one's appearance, such as being well-
dressed, concerned or critical with one's appearance (Helgeson, 1994; Visser, 2002). However,
even the more recent studies are now over two decades old and thus may be outdated.

In contrast to feminine attributes, masculinity has often been linked to more instrumental
attributes such as independence or self-confidence and different characteristics in terms of
appearance and interests (Spence & Helmreich, 1980). Traditional masculine ideologies have
also been used to explain masculine characteristics in the past (Borgogna & McDermott, 2022).
They contain a set of beliefs about men's characteristics, including features such as dominance,
competitiveness, strength, self-reliance, or avoidance of femininity that should be typical for men
(Bem, 1974; Levant, 2011). In the study by Visser (2002), the masculine prototypes involved
focusing on one's career and being active or independent. Alternatively, in a qualitative study by
Helgeson (1994), the attributes such as being muscular, self-confident, tall, dominant, or liking
sports were mentioned. Lastly, scholars also highlighted a sense of agency in connection to

masculinity (Spence & Helmreich, 1978, p. 18). Overall, studies of both masculinity and femininity include a wide range of features, although a new generation of young adults has grown since most of the studies were conducted.

Some studies also differentiate between describing a masculine male and a feminine male, as well as a feminine female and a masculine female (Helgeson, 1994). This suggests that the perceptions of masculinity and femininity can vary depending on the gender of the prototype. In Helgeson's (1994) study, socially desirable traits such as attractiveness, intelligence, self-confidence, and caring were associated with masculine men and feminine women. On the other hand, socially undesirable traits like unattractiveness, weakness, insecurity, and uncaring behavior were more often linked to masculine women and feminine men compared to masculine men and feminine women. This highlights that gender categories can shape the way femininity and masculinity are perceived, with more negative features being attributed to masculine women and feminine men compared to masculine men and feminine women.

Building on the understanding that gender is a socially constructed, culture-dependent, and dynamic construct (Johnson et al., 2009), several gaps in research on gender remain. As many studies, such as the one on prototypes by Helgeson (1994), were done decades ago, it is not known how they evolved in light of the increased gender diversity in recent years (Griffin et al., 2021) and the growing acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community (Sweigart et al., 2024). Similarly, despite the rise of gender identities outside of the masculine and feminine ones (Richards et al., 2016), research on non-binary people is scarce, leaving room for research on non-binary prototypes (Matsuno & Budge, 2017). Additionally, gender studies often involved a sample of psychology university students, leaving gaps in understanding how broader populations view gender (Korabik & McCreary, 2000; Visser, 2002). Based on the reasons stated above, a more

recent study on the prototypes of young adults may be beneficial, as most studies on gender are over 20 years old and fail to account for non-binary identities (Helgeson, 1994; Visser, 2002).

The present study will be an adapted replication study of the research conducted by Helgeson (1994). The goal of the current study is to find the features young adults today associate with various gender categories and the study will also focus on the non-binary prototype, filling a gap in the existing research. Moreover, the study will include a more diverse sample, specifically of all young adults and not only students. The aim is to answer the research question: "What are the masculine, feminine, and non-binary prototypes of young adults?" Additionally, the goal is to compare the prototypes of a masculine male and masculine female, as well as a feminine female and feminine male, and evaluate whether socially undesirable features are more common for a certain prototype.

Methods

Design and Participants

The present research employs a qualitative research design using open-ended questions aimed at investigating the current masculine, feminine, and non-binary prototypes among young adults. Additionally, the study explores the differences between the prototypes of a masculine male compared to a masculine female, as well as a feminine female compared to a feminine male, and compares these also in terms of socially undesirable features.

In total, a convenience sample of 193 people participated in the research. Of the 193 participants, 95 participants were not used in the analysis because 88 people did not reaffirm their consent at the end of the study, 5 people did not provide their age, which was necessary for the study as its target population consisted of young adults aged 18 to 35 years old, and 2 people did not give a description of a person. Therefore, the data of 98 participants was used.

The demographic composition of the final sample included 32 men, 60 women, 2 non-binary people, and 4 people who chose not to indicate their gender. In terms of nationality, 66.3% of participants were Dutch, 16.3% were Slovak, 9.2% German, and 8.2% of other nationalities. Age distribution revealed that 60.2% of participants were aged between 21 and 25, 24.5% of participants were between 18 and 20, and the remaining participants were of other ages. 80.6% of participants indicated they were currently students and 70.4% of all participants responded that they were working. They also indicated their working hours ($M = 13.86$, $SD = 8.53$). Further details regarding the demographic information can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics of Research Participants

Characteristics		*n*	*%*
Age	18-20	24	24.5
	21-25	59	60.2
	26-30	9	9.2
	31-35	6	6.1
Sex at birth	Male	34	34.7
	Female	62	63.3
	Other	2	2.0
Gender	Man	32	32.7
	Woman	60	61.2
	Non-binary	2	2.0
	Other	4	4.1
Nationality	Dutch	65	66.3
	Slovak	16	16.3
	German	9	9.2
	Other	8	8.2
Highest level of education	Primary school	3	3.1
	High school	51	52.0
	College	15	15.3
	University	28	28.6
	Other	1	1.0

Studying	Yes	79	80.6
	No	18	18.4
	Other	1	1.0
Working	Yes	69	70.4
	No	28	28.6
	Other	1	1.0

Materials

The participants were asked to describe at least one of the following five persons: *a masculine male* ($N = 54$), *a masculine female* ($N = 25$), *a feminine male* ($N = 20$), *a feminine female* ($N = 39$), and *a non-binary person* ($N = 20$). After choosing a person they want to describe, the following item was used to measure the gender prototypes: "Can you describe this person? Consider how this person looks, what the person thinks about, how the person behaves-- whatever comes to mind and seems relevant." The question was taken from the study by Helgeson (1994).

Masculinity was assessed through participants' descriptions of a masculine male and a masculine female and femininity through the descriptions of a feminine female and a feminine male. Lastly, non-binary prototypes were measured using participants' descriptions of non-binary people. To explore the differences between the prototypes, the answers of a masculine male were compared to those of a masculine female, and the feminine female responses were compared to those of a feminine male by identifying the common and unique features in the list of the most prototypical features. Lastly, to compare the prototypes in terms of undesirability, socially undesirable features in the list of each prototype were identified.

Procedure

Recruitment was facilitated through six members of the Bachelor thesis group, who shared the link to the study via workplaces, social media platforms, study groups, and personal

networks. An invitation text about the study in English was disseminated, introducing the subject

of the research, outlining the procedure, and providing an estimated time to complete the

questionnaire of approximately 10 minutes, depending on how many questions the person wants

to answer. The participants were directed to an online survey hosted on the Qualtrics platform.

Upon accessing the survey, participants were first presented with information about the purpose

of the study, details on data security, and the intended use of their responses. They were then

asked to provide informed consent before proceeding further.

In the first part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to answer open and

closed questions about some demographics: age, education level, nationality, and current

occupation. In the second part, they were asked to choose one of the following five people to

describe: *a masculine male* ($N = 54$), *a masculine female* ($N = 25$), *a feminine male* ($N = 20$), *a*

feminine female ($N = 39$), and *a non-binary person* ($N = 20$). After they had chosen, they were

asked the following*:* "Can you describe this person? Consider how this person looks, what the

person thinks about, how the person behaves- whatever comes to mind and seems relevant."

After answering one of the questions, participants were given the option to describe another

person. This process continued until they indicated no desire to provide further descriptions. In

the last section, the participants were asked about their sex at birth, their current gender, and if

their high school paid attention to sexual orientation and gender diversity. Lastly, the participants

were asked to reaffirm their consent. By completing the questionnaire, participants had the

chance to win a €25 gift card by providing their email address at the end of the study in a

separate survey to guarantee anonymity. Out of the participants who entered their emails, a

random selection was conducted to determine the winner, who was later contacted about the gift

card.

Ethics

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences at the University of Groningen (EC-BSS) before the data collection, with the research number PSY-2425-S-0084. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. Participants were asked to provide informed consent at the beginning and reaffirm the consent at the end of the study. The collected data was treated confidentially and will be stored for the duration of 10 years. Participants could ask any questions by contacting the supervisor, Ethics Committee, and University of Groningen Data Protection Officer, whose contacts were provided at the beginning of the study.

Data Analysis

For the data analysis, the responses of the participants were divided among the researchers so that each of the six student-researchers analyzed 26 answers. In the initial phase of coding, open coding was applied. This was done using Microsoft Excel 2021. Codes for all the identified elements in the collected responses were identified and placed under the heading "Open codes." Response components that did not answer the given question were categorized under "Comments made by participants (no response to the question)." Additionally, the first coder could record any remarks under the heading "Coder's note." During this phase, each student-researcher was paired with a different student to form a pair, allowing them to check each other's codes. The remarks made by the first coder were reviewed, and discussions were held within pairs or within the group to determine the most appropriate coding.

In the second phase of the coding, the previously created open codes were categorized into themes and features. In the deductive part of the analysis, open codes were assigned to the existing themes from Helgeson (1994): *appearance, personality*, and *interests*, including their

corresponding features. These were integrated into a shared codebook in Microsoft Word. Furthermore, in the inductive part of the analysis, new themes were collaboratively established, namely *biology*, *societal expectations and challenges*, and *no different than others*. Lastly, a category named *other* was left, in which responses that were difficult to place in any of the themes and were mentioned only once were assigned. Similarly, within the themes, the existing features by Helgeson (1994) were identified and new ones were established when necessary. Lastly, socially undesirable features were identified in all prototypes.

Results

Masculinity Prototype

To answer the research question "What are the masculine prototypes of young adults?" and to compare the prototypes of a masculine male to a masculine female, at least 20 features that were mentioned most frequently in each prototype of masculinity were identified. As there were more features with the same frequency for the 20th place, there are 23 features for a masculine male and 30 features for a masculine female (see Table 2). For a masculine male, 10 features are from the theme personality, 8 from appearance, 4 from interests, and 1 from societal expectations and challenges, which is a new theme that was created to place responses that did not fit in the earlier-mentioned categories. For a masculine female, 16 out of the 30 features are from the theme personality, 10 appearance, and 4 interests.

Eleven features in the list of most prototypical features overlap in both gender categories of masculinity. The most mentioned features in terms of appearance that are common for both a masculine male and a masculine female include being muscular, having short hair, being tall, wearing casual clothes, dark clothes, and having sharp facial features such as a "sharp jawline." Regarding personality, being self-confident, caring, having strong convictions, and being

dominant were mentioned. Having strong convictions in a masculine male included answers regarding having "a lot of strong opinions" or views on society, women, or therapy, such as "does not believe in therapy," while for a masculine female, these included mainly being non-conforming, such as "questioning norms." Lastly, for interests, sports were mentioned the most often in both categories.

Out of the 23 features in the list, 12 were mentioned exclusively for a masculine male. The most frequently mentioned include being strong, having a hairy face, being tall, being responsible, being interested in fitness and dating women, not talking about feelings, or not being emotional. As for the 19 characteristics mentioned for a masculine female exclusively, avoidance of femininity was mentioned seven times, including answers like "never wears dresses" or "does not like to present with feminine style." Moreover, the other attributes include having a ponytail, being tough, active, and aggressive, wearing differentiated accessories such as "robust jewelry" or "black accessories," having male friends, and male-dominant occupations such as working in the military or the police.

Table 2

Prototypical Features of Masculinity

	Masculine male	*f*		Masculine female	*f*
A	**Muscular**	21	A	**Short hair**	10
P	**Self-confident**	18	A	**Casual dress**	9
A	Strong	14	P	Avoidance of femininity	7
A	Hairy face	13	P	**Caring**	6
A	**Tall**	11	P	**Strong convictions**	5
P	Responsible	10	A	Ponytail	4
A	**Casual dress**	10	P	**Self-confident**	4
I	**Sports**	9	P	Tough	4
I	Fitness	8	P	Active	4
I	Dates women	8	A	**Muscular**	4
P	Not emotional	8	I	**Sports**	3
P	Does not talk about		I	Men friends	3
	feelings	8	I	Male-dominant occupation	3

P	**Caring**	8	A	Differentiated accessories	3
P	Arrogant *	7	P	Aggressive *	3
P	**Dominant**	7	A	**Tall**	2
A	**Short hair**	7	P	Ambitious	2
P	**Strong convictions**	7	P	Homosexual	2
A	**Sharp facial features**	6	P	**Dominant**	2
A	**Dark** (hair, eyes, clothes)	6	P	Realistic	2
			P	Nonchalant	2
P	Focuses on growth	6	P	Passionate	2
P	Resilient	6	P	Independent	2
I	Cars/motorcycles	6	P	Direct	2
S	Societal expectations	6	P	Disconnected from self	2
			I	Male interests	2
			A	Colored hair	2
			A	**Dark clothes**	2
			A	Sneakers	2
			A	**Sharp facial features**	2

Note. A: appearance, P: personality, I: interests, S: societal expectations and challenges. Features in bold represent those that are common for both categories. Features marked with an asterisk (*) denote socially undesirable features.

Femininity Prototype

To provide a prototype of femininity, the most commonly mentioned characteristics were also identified. As there were multiple features for the 20th place for a feminine male, there are 24 features listed for that prototype (see Table 3). For a feminine female, nine features are from the theme appearance, eight belong to personality, one to interests, one to biology, and one to societal expectations and challenges. For the prototype of a feminine male, 12 features are from the theme of personality, 10 from appearance, and 2 from interests.

As for the similarities in the two prototypes, eight features overlap for both a feminine female and a feminine male and can be seen in bold. The top five features prototypical of a feminine male are seen as prototypical also for a feminine female. To mention the overlapping features, it was being caring, social, kind, emotional, wearing make-up, being concerned with

one's appearance, being well-dressed, and being well-groomed to be viewed as prototypical for both groups.

As for differences in the two prototypes, 12 and 16 features in the list were uniquely attributed to a feminine female and a feminine male, respectively. The analysis revealed that having long hair, wearing a dress, and wearing jewelry were attributed only to a feminine female. This was also true for the feature of facing social expectations, which included answers like "has gender roles assigned to her" or "has to take care of partner, kids, house." For a feminine male, the features of being small, expressive, having a high-pitched voice, short hair, done nails, and wearing traditionally feminine clothes such as "skirts" or "a crop top" were mentioned only in this prototype.

Table 3

Prototypical Features of Femininity

	Feminine female	*f*		Feminine male	*f*
A	**Wears make-up**	18	I	**Concern w/appearance**	10
P	**Caring**	14	P	**Caring**	9
A	Long hair	14	P	**Social**	8
I	**Concern w/appearance**	14	A	**Wears make-up**	7
			P	**Emotional**	6
A	Wears a dress	13	A	Small	6
P	**Emotional**	11	P	**Kind**	5
P	**Social**	10	P	Expressive	4
P	**Kind**	10	A	High-pitched voice	4
A	**Well-dressed**	10	A	Wears (traditionally) feminine clothes	4
A	Accessories/Jewelry	10	A	Short hair	4
S	Faces social expectations	10	A	Nails done	4
A	**Well-groomed**	9	A	**Well-dressed**	3
P	Gentle	8	P	Sensitive	3
P	Graceful	7	I	Progressive/left-wing	3
A	Soft features	7	A	Dresses uniquely	3
P	Traditional	7	A	**Well-groomed**	3
P	Friendly	6	P	Empathetic	3
A	Wears traditionally feminine colors	5	P	Soft	2
			A	Tall	2

A	Winter clothes	5	P	Funny	2
B	XX chromosomes	5	P	Open-minded	2
			P	Homosexual	2
			P	Weak *	2

Note. A: appearance, P: personality, I: interests, B: biology, S: societal expectations and challenges. Features in bold represent those that are common for both categories. Features marked with an asterisk (*) denote socially undesirable features.

Non-Binary Prototype

Lastly, to answer the part of the research question: "What is the nonbinary prototype of young adults?" 18 of the most repeated features in the responses of participants are provided in Table 4. There are only 18 features, as apart from these, all the other answers were mentioned only once. In the list, nine features focus on appearance, six on personality, two features on interests, and one is from the theme no different than others. The theme *no different than others* was established only in the non-binary prototype, as it did not fit any of the existing themes, including answers such as "behaves normally," "do not behave differently from other people," or "just a person."

To describe the non-binary prototype, having strong convictions was mentioned 18 times. Answers that were coded into this category include supporting LGBTQ+ rights, such as "very outspoken about LHBTQ+ rights" or being non-conforming to societal norms, with answers such as "sees themselves as not fitting into the usual gender categories" or "does not like to be put in a box." The second most commonly mentioned feature is struggling with gender identity, which was described, for example, as "thoughts around gender identity might fluctuate over time" or "struggle with their life because they do not fit into male/female boxes." The following most frequently mentioned features are from the theme of appearance and include features such as dressing uniquely, gender-neutral looks, funky jewelry, or colorful hair.

Table 4

Prototypical Features of Non-Binary

	Non-binary	*f*
P	Strong convictions	18
P	Struggling with gender identity	12
A	Dresses uniquely	5
A	Gender neutral looks	5
A	Funky jewelry	4
A	Colorful hair	4
P	Likes attention	4
N	No different than others	4
A	Dresses casually	3
P	Empathetic	3
A	Short hair	2
A	Tattoos	2
A	Gender neutral clothing	2
I	No concern with appearance	2
I	Rainbows	2
A	Wears make-up	2
P	Insecure *	2
P	Shy	2

Note. A: appearance, P: personality, I: interests, N: no different than others. Features marked with an asterisk (*) denote socially undesirable features.

Socially Undesirable Features

The features that were identified as socially undesirable can be seen in the three tables denoted with an asterisk (*). To sum up these results, in the list of around 20 most prototypical features, for a masculine male, the feature arrogant was evaluated as undesirable and was mentioned in seven codes in descriptions such as "brash," "rude," or "pompous." For a masculine female, the feature aggressive was mentioned in three codes. This feature included descriptions "is more aggressive to get what she wants," "is passive aggressive," and "is sometimes rough in their speech." For a prototype of a feminine female, no features were

identified as undesirable in the list of the prototypical features. For a feminine male, it was weak, which was mentioned twice, and for non-binary, the feature insecure was also mentioned twice.

Discussion

The goal of the present study was to answer the research question: "What are the masculine, feminine, and non-binary prototypes of young adults?" In sum, features which participants associate with masculinity were identified, and the most frequently mentioned ones include features regarding appearance, such as being muscular, having short hair, or wearing casual clothes, and personality traits, such as being self-confident. Furthermore, the results of the study revealed an overlap in the features prototypical for a feminine female and a feminine male, namely wearing make-up or being concerned with one's appearance in general, alongside interpersonally-oriented features, such as being caring, social, emotional, or kind. Lastly, the features that were most prevalent for non-binary were often unique to this prototype only and not mentioned in the masculinity and femininity prototypes, such as having strong convictions regarding societal norms or struggling with gender identity, gender-neutral looks, dressing uniquely, or wearing funky jewelry.

Other aims of the study were to compare the two prototypes of masculinity, a masculine male and a masculine female, and the two prototypes of femininity, a feminine female and a feminine male, and examine socially undesirable features in all the gender prototypes. These findings show that despite the overlap in some areas, there are still distinct features that people connect to each prototype exclusively based on the gender categories of male and female. These include features such as being strong, not being emotional, or not talking about feelings for a masculine male, avoidance of femininity in a masculine female, facing societal expectations in a feminine female, or being small and expressive in a feminine male. As for the socially

undesirable characteristics, in general, the features generated by participants were positive, with socially desirable features dominating and only a few undesirable features generated. These include being arrogant in a masculine male, aggressive in a masculine female, weak in a feminine male, and insecure in a non-binary person. However, the frequency of undesirable features was not high for any of the prototypes, as none of these features appeared in the top 10 features for any of the prototypes.

Overall, the data of the present research are somewhat consistent with previous studies regarding the prototypical features (Helgeson, 1994; Visser, 2002), although they also differ, as they do not offer clear-cut boundaries of men being strictly career-oriented and women being family-oriented as suggested by Visser (2002). The features that remained the same as in other studies include features regarding appearance in both the masculine and feminine prototypes. Additionally, overlap can also be found in the personality theme, namely in interpersonal features like being caring, kind, or emotional in femininity and some instrumental features, such as being self-confident in masculinity. Some interests also remained the same. What differs, for example, is that, in the current study, a masculine man is also seen as caring, which is typically more associated with femininity (Helgeson, 1994). Being career-oriented or focused on work did not make it into the most common prototypical features, neither did being family-oriented or nurturing for the female categories (Bem, 1974; Visser, 2002). Overall, the findings of the current study suggest similar results in some areas but now reveal a more mixed picture regarding the gender prototypes.

The mixed findings of the present study are in line with research on both persisting gender roles and changing gender norms (Kaur et al., 2024; Perrone et al., 2009). On the one hand, there is research that suggests that traditional gender roles are deeply embedded in

people's views and, therefore, display strong continuity even among young people (Kaur et al., 2024). This can account for the findings of the present study, such as the interpersonally-oriented and interpersonal features, which are similar to those in previous research (Visser, 2002). On the contrary, Perrone et al. (2009) highlight the evolving nature of gender roles of men and women, with men becoming more involved in parenting and household tasks while women being more focused on their careers. This shift in traditional roles likely influences how individuals perceive the prototypical features of masculinity and femininity. In the present study, the absence of traits such as being family-oriented for women and career-oriented for men may reflect these changing dynamics in gender roles. Furthermore, Sweeting and colleagues (2014) suggest that traditional views on gender roles are less prevalent among younger generations of people. This could help explain findings such as why certain characteristics like being caring, which were once considered feminine, are now seen as overlapping with masculine traits. These evolving perceptions of gender roles might have contributed to the more nuanced and mixed picture of gender prototypes seen in the present study.

The most common features in the non-binary prototype, namely having strong convictions regarding nonconformity and LGBTQ+ rights and struggling with gender identity, can be understood through existing research (McCarty & Burt, 2024; Nadal et al., 2012; Rood et al., 2017). Firstly, many studies and people categorize non-binary individuals under the broader umbrella of transgender or the even wider category of transgender and gender non-conforming (McCarty & Burt, 2024). As transgender and queer identities are inherently linked to the LGBTQ+ community, participants may associate non-binary identities with the LGBTQ+ community and gender nonconformity, which aligns with the findings of this paper. Consequently, regarding the second finding of struggling with one's identity, research has shown

that non-cisgender individuals often face identity-related challenges, particularly from the perspective of others, who may view them as confused or even fail to accept their identity (Nadal et al., 2012; Rood et al., 2017). Similarly, a recent study by McCarty and Burt (2024) found that non-binary people were rated more negatively and experienced greater identity invalidation than cisgender people. The present results, therefore, reflect common perceptions mentioned in the literature, namely that people tend to link non-binary people to the LGBTQ+ community and may invalidate their identity.

The present findings regarding socially undesirable features differ from the ones reported in prior research, such as in the prototype of a masculine female. Helgeson (1994) reported socially undesirable characteristics in terms of appearance, such as unattractive, ugly, or fat, to be attributed to a masculine female. In the current study, however, none of the features were mentioned by the participants. Additionally, Helgeson's (1994) results suggest that the prototype of a masculine female includes features such as being uncaring, however, the current study found that uncaring was present in neither of the prototypes. The only socially undesirable feature found was the characteristic arrogant in masculine men and aggressive in masculine women, mentioned in seven and three codes, respectively. Therefore, it cannot be concluded that socially undesirable traits are linked to any gender, and negative features in terms of appearance were not mentioned at all, which might imply a shift toward more positive views of masculine women.

The findings of the present study also vary when it comes to undesirable characteristics and the most frequently mentioned features in feminine men. According to Helgeson's (1994) results, a feminine male was commonly described as insecure and weak. In contrast, in the present study, the feature weak was mentioned only twice, and the feature insecure was not used at all. Moreover, while the most commonly mentioned feature, reported by almost half of the

participants in Helgeson's (1994) study, described a feminine male as homosexual, in the present study, only two out of 20 participants mentioned this feature. Thus, contrary to the previous research, the feature homosexual was not that prevalent in the present study, and socially desirable aspects of femininity, such as being caring, social, or kind, were attributed to both feminine females and males in the present findings. Overall, the responses in the present study were less negative in terms of attributing socially undesirable features to a feminine male.

Growing acceptance of gender diversity and changing gender roles may explain why non-traditional gender identities, like feminine males and masculine females, are viewed more positively in the present study (Griffin et al., 2021). The more positive view of feminine males can be connected to the increased awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ+ rights and gender diversity (Griffin et al., 2021; Sweigart et al., 2024). Given that previous findings report homosexuality alongside socially undesirable features, a higher rate of acceptance of homosexuality in the primarily Dutch sample of the present study could be one of the possible explanations behind finding less socially undesirable features in the prototype of a feminine male (Barrientos & González, 2022, p. 202). Another contributing factor might be that younger generations tend to hold less traditional views of gender roles (Sweeting et al., 2014), which may contribute to greater openness and acceptance of more androgynous identities, such as masculine females and feminine males. In conclusion, the shifting gender roles and generational changes may account for the low presence of socially undesirable findings in the current study.

Strengths and Limitations

The present study allowed for the replication and adaptation of a former study (Helgeson, 1994) to investigate the current gender prototypes, with several notable strengths. Firstly, the study was adapted to explore the prototype of non-binary people, on which the research is scarce.

The findings from the present study, therefore, contribute to the research of gender beyond the traditional masculine and feminine categories. Additionally, instead of providing predetermined categories for the participants to choose from, they were let to express their opinions freely, which allowed for the meanings of the views and thoughts that participants expressed to be analyzed carefully, offering a deeper understanding of the phenomena (Queirós et al., 2017). The inductive approach of the analysis further allowed for the identification of new themes and features that were not previously mentioned in research and that reflected the meaning of the participants' answers (Willing, 2019). This highlights another advantage of using a qualitative design, which is its flexibility, as it allows for exploring new areas of research (Queirós et al., 2017). Lastly, although some features were common in more prototypes, such as having strong convictions, what these meant in different prototypes differed, and the qualitative nature of the present study allowed for the recognition, analysis, and interpretation of the differences.

Despite the mentioned strengths, the study also poses multiple limitations. First of all, participants were recruited using a convenience sampling method, as the student researchers in the study distributed the questionnaire to people within their social circle. As a result, the sample was not representative of the target population of all young adults, as the majority of the participants were Dutch. Research shows that many psychological phenomena and perspectives of people can vary significantly across cultures (Henrich et al., 2010). Since gender perspectives are culture-dependent (Johnson et al., 2009), this is particularly relevant for this study. In the research by Gibbons and colleagues (1991), students from less wealthy, collectivistic countries showed more traditional attitudes toward gender roles than students from wealthier, individualistic countries. As the majority of the sample in the present study is from Western, individualistic, industrialized, and educated countries, the results may vary from the views on

gender prototypes of people from less wealthy, collectivistic nations. Moreover, 63.3% of the sample was composed of women, which might have skewed the perspective on gender. The study by Sweeting and colleagues (2014) suggests that women are more inclined to less traditional views on gender roles. This may account for some differences in the results compared with other studies (Spence & Helmreich, 1980; Visser, 2002). In sum, the characteristics of the sample may have significantly shaped the findings on gender, which is why the results are limited in external validity in terms of generalizing them to all young adults.

Another limitation is related to the number of responses for some of the prototypes in this study. For example, only 20 participants provided a description for a non-binary person, which caused many answers to be unique, with no repetition across participants. That is also why, in the table of non-binary prototypes, there are only 18 features, even though the aim was to mention at least 20. Similarly, there were only 20 responses for a feminine male, which caused six features in the table to be mentioned only twice. Although sample sizes in qualitative research often cannot be predetermined (Sim et al., 2018), the small sample sizes could have consequences on the interpretation of the results, such as making it difficult to identify prevailing features in the prototypes due to the small number of responses. Moreover, as a consequence of not reaching informational redundancy, which may be the case in the present study, some relevant aspects may have been missed (Sandelowski, 1995).

Future Directions and Practical Implications

Building on the mentioned strengths and limitations, future research could replicate the study in different samples. First, expanding into samples with diverse cultural contexts, such as various Asian, East European, or African societies, could provide the data to explore the differences in gender prototypes, as the demographic characteristics of the participants, such as

culture, can shape people's perceptions of gender (Johnson et al., 2009). Comparing prototypes among various demographics in further research might also shed light on the role of gender perceptions in influencing social attitudes, norms, or discrimination. Additionally, given the limited responses on the non-binary prototype in this study, future research could look into this more extensively. Conducting interviews or qualitative studies with people who identify as non-binary could help to investigate whether there are some overarching features and offer a deeper understanding of their experience.

Additionally, as fewer undesirable features were found compared to previous studies (Helgeson, 1994), future research can explore what makes the prototypes less negative and investigate factors that contribute to these more flexible and adaptive prototypes. This can be done by expanding the study with additional questions that delve into the source of people's views, such as education, media, social circles, or family. For instance, investigating whether the participant's childhood household adhered to traditional gender roles can be beneficial, as research shows that being raised in such environments has an effect on the children's behavior (Endendijk et al., 2017). This approach might provide deeper insights into what factors influence gender prototypes and could help identify ways to modify or reduce harmful prototypes or norms.

As for practical implications, the findings presented in this study can be evaluated in terms of the expectations and pressure they impose. Based on the identified gender prototypes, harmful norms can be targeted in interventions. To give an example, the prototype of not talking about feelings, not being emotional, or appearing tough in masculine men can be interpreted as a denial of weakness, which can be harmful, as this was described as one of the factors influencing suicide in men (Swami et al., 2008). Specifically, the way masculinity is viewed and the present

expectations set by society influence the way in which suicide is taken, seen, and committed. This implies that findings such as this one can be targeted in interventions such as suicide prevention programs to tackle pressuring norms and stereotypes.

The results of this study can also be used by practitioners in the mental health sector or educators in understanding the expectations set on gender non-conforming individuals. The prototype of a non-binary person can provide a deeper insight into the challenges people face. There is evidence that suggests that people who identify outside of the gender binary face higher levels of discrimination and experience more mental health issues (Lefevor et al., 2019). Understanding the expectations and norms can guide professionals in recognizing what aspects of identity to promote and what harmful norms to address or challenge, such as struggling with gender identity. This knowledge can inform interventions, educational programs, and approaches that foster more supportive environments.

Conclusions

Overall, the present study offers insights into the current masculine, feminine, and non-binary prototypes, suggesting that they are generally perceived in a positive light, with few socially undesirable features being recalled. The findings can serve as a basis for future research that can continue to investigate these prototypes in diverse samples regarding cultural backgrounds and individuals with non-binary identities while paying attention to how gender is evolving. Additionally, understanding how these prototypes become more or less prominent can help inform interventions aimed at reducing harmful gender stereotypes or offering a supportive environment for individuals who fit outside of the gender binary.

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Appendix

Declaration of AI Use

I acknowledge the use of AI, namely Chat-GPT, for the following purposes:

Assistance with grammar and spelling:

- Example prompt: Are the commas used correctly in the following paragraph? These findings are in line with research on both, persisting gender roles, as well as changing gender norms (Kaur et al., 2024; Perrone et al., 2009).

Assistance with literature search:

- Example prompt: Can you suggest some relevant theories or researchers for the topic of gender prototypes of masculinity and femininity?

Assistance with phrasing, transitions, improving the flow and clarity:

- Example prompt: Can you use a transition for the following sentence to connect it to the previous paragraph about the conceptualizations of gender in terms of masculinity and femininity? The concept of androgyny emerged.